

The Alexander Thomson Society Newsletter

Nº27, May 1998

Thomson, Marks, and Spencer



MARKS & SPENCER'S Sauchiehall Street store was built in the 1930s, and remains a retail landmark today, with its odd asymmetry. The store was extended in the 1980s to include the former Woolworth's building to the west, but what was there before, and what is the Thomson connection – and why is it asymmetrical? Find out on Page 8.

Inside: Thomson's speech: 'Why is there no Modern Style in Architecture?'

Plus: Speculative builders, Thomson's competition fountain,, Thomson tombs, and the ongoing threat to Egyptian Halls

Egyptian Halls rescue delayed

WE ARE sorry to have to report bad and, indeed, most disturbing news about Egyptian Halls. After years of shameful neglect by its owners, culminating in the compulsory purchase order rightly imposed by Glasgow City Council, and following agreement with the tenants of the ground floor shops and with a potential user of the upper floors, and with the approval and support of Historic Scotland and other bodies, the long-awaited restoration of this magnificent and extraordinary commercial building – was due to commence in March.

It has not – because, at the very last minute, the compulsory purchase order was challenged by one of the former owners, a Mr Douglas Wu, who was one of three with a 50% stake in the building (the other 50% belonged to the Hong Kong-based proprietor of the Chinese restaurant on the first floor). Quite why Mr Wu wishes to challenge the C.P.O. when he and his partners were unable to maintain the building – let alone produce the £2.3 million needed to refurbish it – is not clear, except that the legal challenge is being supported by a Mr Tom Dyer from Dundee, who is claiming a development interest.

Mr Dyer's interesting career in accountancy was reported in *The Herald* for March; he also acts as a property developer, and has engaged architects and engineers ostensibly to save and restore Egyptian Halls, although he has yet to demonstrate that he has the resources to do this.

The real problem with this vexatious eleventh-hour intervention is that the wheels of the law grind slowly. The matter must now go to the Court of Session and, despite a

request from the City that this appeal be heard quickly, it is likely to be at least ten months before the case can be decided.

We trust, of course, that Mr Dyer's claim will be dismissed. But the real problem is the delay. Egyptian Halls is now in such poor condition that it may not survive another bad winter, and the City's department of building control have taken a close interest in the structure before now. Furthermore, the ground-floor retailers who have supported the restoration proposals are now uncertain whether the necessary grant aid will still be available in a year's time while there is also a danger that the end user for the upper floors may disappear because of the delay.

Mr Dyer's and Mr Wu's intervention has, in fact, put Egyptian Halls in jeopardy. What their real motives are must remain a matter for speculation, but this is not the first time that a lengthy legal challenge by property developers has resulted in the destruction of yet more of Glasgow's precious architectural heritage. Indeed, there is now a real danger that Glasgow's Year of Architecture and Design in 1999 be made a mockery and that the associated Greek Thomson exhibition achievement in the restored 'Lighthouse' in Mitchell Street could be marked by the demolition of Alexander Thomson's finest commercial building.

This simply must not be allowed to happen.

Holmwood restoration

THE RESTORATION of the structure of Holmwood is almost complete and the National Trust for Scotland will open the house to the public in September. What is par-

ticularly exciting is that the remarkable connecting wall with the coach house has now been rebuilt, while missing eaves with their metal brackets and ornamental chimney-pots have all been replaced. Furthermore, the house has now been returned to its appearance before the alterations of the 1920s by walling up the later windows. Indeed, the exemplary restoration carried out by Page & Park ought to set a new standard in Glasgow.

Offprints

IN NEWSLETTER N°18 for February 1997, Gavin Stamp wrote about the precedents – or, rather, about the the lack of them – for Thomson's picturesque and asymmetrical design for Holmwood and other villas. He has since revised and expanded this article for the (American) *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

Offprints of this illustrated article, entitled "At Once Classic and Picturesque..." Alexander Thomson's Holmwood", are available to members of the Society. Please send a cheque for £3, payable to The Alexander Thomson Society, together with a stamped addressed envelope no smaller than 11 1/2 by 9 inches (295 by 320 mm) to the Chairman at 1 Moray Place, Glasgow G41 2AQ.

£7.5m grant for Grecian Chambers

THE SCOTTISH Arts Council National Lottery Awards announced in March include a £7.5 million grant to the Centre for Contemporary Arts, principal occupiers of Thomson's Grecian

Chambers building in Sauchiehall Street. The grant is to undertake a major redevelopment of the areas behind Thomson's facade, upgrading existing facilities and creating five performance/exhibition areas, as well as for the purchase of new equipment and the creation of a studio flat for visiting artists. The grant – the largest ever made by the SAC – will allow

building work to start next year for completion in 2000.

The redevelopment programme designed by Page & Park, includes the purchase of adjoining parts of the building, including parts of the building occupied by textile retailers Mandors, and extending the CCA to include properties in Scott Street currently used as a nightclub. The

proposal does appear to include the loss of one of only two remaining early 19th century villas built when Sauchiehall Street was first developed. It was around this villa that Grecian Chambers was created. The villa, still visible from Scott Street, is in poor condition, having lost its front staircase, leaving its blocked-up original entrance stranded.

Note: The second remaining villa, also currently used as a nightclub, was originally the home of the Mirrlees family. It sits in ground immediately west of the Baird Hall of Residence, fronted to Sauchiehall Street by a row of one-and-a-half storey shops.

Grecian Chambers into the Millennium

THE Director of the CCA, Graham MacKenzie, together with architects Page & Park, have offered to give a presentation to members of The Alexander Thomson Society on their proposals for Thomson's Grecian Chambers and the surrounding site.

A date has yet to be finalised for this event, although it is likely that the event will take place over the next month on a weekday in the early evening and last up to 90 minutes. Notice will be sent in good time of the final arrangements for this presentation to members in the central belt of Scotland.

Below: Grecian Chambers around 1900. Photograph by Annan. Around 1902, a fire gutted the photographer's studio in the roof. Although Thomson's floor-plan was reinstated, his original wooden roof beams were replaced by metal ones.



'How is it that there is no modern style in architecture?'

ALEXANDER THOMSON'S address to the Glasgow Institute of Architects in 1871 has often been selectively quoted, particularly by those anxious to present its author as a sort of proto-modern, who rejected the tyranny of historical precedent and groped towards a non-historical functional architecture through the encircling fog of eclecticism. That, of course, is to fall into the trap of interpreting the past by the preoccupations of the present, for while Thomson was undoubtedly a most original and thoughtful designer, anxious to exploit the possibilities of new materials like cast-iron and plate glass, he was far from being a pioneer of the Modern Movement. However "modern" his building may seem in their abstraction and innovation, Thomson's imagination was firmly rooted in Antiquity.

The central question Thomson posed in this characteristically elegant and powerful oration – How is it that there is no modern style of architecture? – was, as he himself said, often asked in his time. With their detailed knowledge of world history and of other and earlier civilisations, the Victorians were acutely conscious that their own time had produced no recognisable style like the styles of the past, a language of architecture that could be categorised and labelled, its grammar and vocabulary codified – a distinct Victorian style that could join the Egyptian, the Greek and the Gothic. Why was it that a civilisation that clearly justified belief in Progress, that was conquering the world with steam railways and iron ships, with the electric telegraph, scientific medicine and sound government, could not manage to produce a distinctive manner of building as had earlier and more primitive societies?

Thomson's ostensible solution – to abandon with all convenient expedi-

tion the whole mass of accumulated human traditions under which his generation had been smothered – may seem a radical and ruthless answer, but it was born of the awareness that the tragedy of his time was that architects simply knew too much. Creative innocence and spontaneity were undermined by the inescapable historical sense. And in this, Thomson was simply echoing the worries of his earlier adversary, George Gilbert Scott, who, in discussing 'The Architecture of the Future' in 1857 had written that,

"The peculiar characteristic of the present day, as compared with all former periods, is this, – that we are acquainted with the history of art. We know better whence each nation of antiquity derived its arts better than they ever knew themselves, and can trace out with precision the progressions of which those who were their prime movers were almost unconscious... It is reserved to us, alone of all the generations of the human race, to know perfectly our own standing-point, and to look back upon the entire history of what has gone before us, tracing out all the changes in the arts of the past as clearly as if every scene in its long drama were re-enacted before our eyes. This is amazingly interesting to us as a matter of amusement and erudition, but I fear is a hindrance rather than a help to us as artists."

And others had written in a similar vein. But Thomson's solution to this dilemma was not to adopt the Gothic in all its apparent flexibility, or to make a desperate search for a conspicuously new style, such as was attempted by such naïve architects as Thomas 'Victorian' Harris. As Ruskin had said, "if you are not content with a Palladio, you will not be content with a Paxton, and pray you get rid of the idea of there being any necessity for the invention of a new style."

Thomson knew well that a new style could never be invented by one man, but must evolve, for

"these old forms are not to be despised... They are there to teach us what has been already discovered – to place us upon an elevated starting-point for yet higher attainments..."

Nor – for all his ability to combine the Egyptian and the Greek and to spice up the result with a dash of the Indian – was Thomson's solution to be as eclectic as possible, choosing useful or attractive features from a wide variety of styles. By 1871, the great moral crusade of the Gothic Revival was failing, and, having run successively through so many phases of Gothic – both English and Continental – architects were now experimenting with yet more precedents: Elizabethan and Jacobean, with Dutch gables and leaded-light windows, to produce those styles loosely categorised as 'Old English' and 'Queen Anne' in a subtle and creative but none the less vain attempt to escape from the dilemma imposed by history.

Thomson's alternative answer was simply to return to fundamentals, and for him, that meant the pure, trabeated language of the Greeks – a language which, as he argued persuasively, could be developed both to accommodate contemporary conditions and to incorporate modern materials, and of which he was surely thinking when he said that

"there are in some of the more highly developed styles features which are as well near perfection as we can well conceive."

So the past was not to be rejected – far from it. For the real answer was to adhere to the eternal, Divine laws of architecture, which were always there to be followed if only architects would see, and learn. As Thomson put it in his Haldane Lectures three years later,

in discussing the work of his predecessors,

"the promoters of the Greek revival... failed; not because of the scantiness of the material, but because they could not see through the material into the laws upon which that architecture rested. They failed to master their style, and so became its slaves."

Thomson had given a number of lectures to the Glasgow Architectural Society over the years [which we hope to publish in future editions of this *Newsletter*], most famously his bold attack on Scott's Gothic designs for the university in 1866. His 1871 Presidential address to the Glasgow Institute of Architects seems to anticipate some of the other themes developed in the Haldane Lectures a few years later, as in the insistence that, *pace* Ruskin and many of the Goths, architecture does not bear the least resemblance to anything in nature, that it is peculiarly and exclusively a human work. As Thomson put it in 1874,

"Whence then come Music and Architecture? There is nothing in Nature like either; for, although they may have been slow of growth, the fact is before us that they are something that by man or through his agency has been added to the word of God, and that, not presumptuously or sinfully, as some would tell us, but by destiny and duty; for, being made in the image of God, man was made partaken of the divine nature so far as to become a fellow-worker with God – in however humble a sense, a co-creator."

Above all, there is the message here as in the Haldane Lectures that architecture must respond to laws, and that these laws – an expression of physical and mathematical truths apprehended by all civilisations – are eternal and

thus an inescapable aspect of creation; that is, of the Divine. In this religious view of architecture, he might, perhaps, be compared with Pugin, with his insistence that Gothic was the only true Christian (Catholic) style while the Greek was to be discarded a product of a mere "Pagan" civilisation (a notion Thomson, of course, impatiently rejected), except that the Presbyterian Glaswegian's understanding of Divine law was deeper, more inclusive, less sectarian and partisan. For Thomson, the Gothic was irrational, an expression of a short and superseded phase of human history and of Christian development, while the essence of the trabeated language of Classicism had far deeper roots.

"Long before man came to need it, long before the foundation of the world, at the very beginning, in the councils of eternity, the laws which regulate this art were framed, and... it cannot be supposed that they have been drifting down the stream of time, unheeded by their Author."

At a time of confusion and doubt, Thomson committed himself not to any one style, or to any one religion, but to universal, perennial truths.

Few others shared his interpretation of these truths. For Gilbert Scott, who had nailed his colours to the Gothic cause, "the arch must ever in future claim precedence over the beam and lintel," although, a century later, most structures are of reinforced concrete or steel and are trabeated rather than arcuated (Thomson, like Schinkel, can be seen as a precursor of the rectilinear abstraction of Mies van der Rohe). Even so, as J. Mordaunt Crook argued in discussing Thomson's lecture in his book on *The Dilemma of Style* (1987),

"by spurning all use of the arch, he chose to fight his battles with one hand tied behind his back. Like Pugin in reverse, his religious convictions... cut him off from whole

sections of architectural experience."

Nevertheless,

"within the parameters of his chosen medium, 'Greek' Thomson was unbeatable. He knew the power of line, mass and gravitational expression. He understood, above all, the communicating role of metaphor."

But what, in particular, is notable about this lecture text is that, for once, 'Greek' Thomson did not once mention the word 'Greek'. Possibly, by 1871, Thomson was relaxing his rigid adherence to the virtues of one style. The 1870s was a decade of change, of doubt and confusion, and, by 1871, Thomson had his best work behind him. Perhaps he was beginning to become disillusioned, recognising that there is more than one road to salvation and that to achieve the progress he desired, a more broad minded approach to style was necessary. After all, as he admitted that "no two minds are exactly alike, and as all our work should be done 'on soul and conscience', it is better that everything should be cast into the crucible," this lecture might be interpreted as a qualified change of mind. But surely not: he had recently completed his Egyptian Halls, which *The Architect* considered the "most successful effort" in "Mr Thomson's well-known 'Egyptian-Greek' style – a style which he has made his own, and in which he has no rival," while a belief in the virtues of trabeation is somehow implicit in every reference to eternal laws. Besides, three years later in the Haldane Lectures, Thomson would return to a spirited defence of the superiority of the Greek. Perhaps the tactful, un-Grecian nature of this lecture may simply be explained by the fact that it was a presidential address to a professional institute which, by its nature, needs must be a broad church and included Goths as well as

Classicists amongst its membership.

But even if it was a tactful performance, this lecture still serves to emphasise what an isolated and independent figure Thomson was towards the end of his career, heroically maintaining the virtue of developing a single style when all around him – even in Glasgow – were collapsing into eclecticism. Such heroic tenacity to an unfashionable ideal may have made Thomson seem old-fashioned, but we might well argue today that he was in fact ahead of his time – not so much in anticipating Modern Architecture (whatever that may have been, or be), but in looking forward to the revival of the authority of Classicism in the Edwardian period. The eclecticism of the Late Victorian decades, culminating in the feverish experimentation of art nouveau was succeeded by a profound reaction – ‘The Morning After,’ as Goodhart-Rendel put it – when the Grand Manner returned to fashion, when the great Burnet of Glasgow was invited South to enlarge the British Museum (as no London architect seemed up to the job), and the new architectural schools loosely conformed to the model of the *École des Beaux-Arts* and taught a system based upon understanding the Orders.

In Glasgow, this meant the appointment of Eugène Bourdon as Professor of Architecture in 1904, the countering of the waning Mackintosh influence and a revival of interest in the architecture of ‘Greek’ Thomson. Indeed, it is surely no accident that the Edwardian belief in discipline and authority was accompanied by the publication of the first serious articles on Thomson since his death in the London journals – by Reginald Blomfield in the *Architectural Review* in 1904, by Lionel Budden in *The Builder* in 1910 and by Trystan Edwards in *The Architects and Builders Journal* in 1914 – the fateful year that also saw tribute

paid to Thomson by Albert Richardson in his great revisionist study of Monumental Classic Architecture in Great Britain and Ireland, at the end of which he argued that

“Thomson’s predilection for abstract form in its enthralling mystery and dramatic intensity was the outcome of an original mind. His work in this respect stands alone, and while it reveals no sympathy for the broader and more academic rendering of the antique, as exemplified by the works of Professor Cockerell, Elmes or Playfair, within its own sphere it is unique.”



THE TEXT of Thomson’s lecture was published in the *Glasgow Herald* for 8th April, 1871, and *The Architect* for 15th April, 1871. Although often quoted from, it has not been published in full since. The following is the report of the relevant meeting of the Glasgow Institute of Architects as printed in *The Architect*.

Glasgow Institute of Architects

THE MEMBERS of this Institute dined together in the George Hotel, George Square, Glasgow, on the evening of the 7th inst. Mr. Alexander Thomson, I.A., president, occupied the chair.

The President, in proposing the toast of the “Glasgow Institute of Architects,” delivered the following address:

This institution is still in its infancy – not much more than half through its third year. Of course, its history is correspondingly brief; and although we may have the satisfaction of knowing that it has not existed, during even that short period, without beneficial results, yet the incidents are not such

as to call for remark at this time. But in a great and growing community such as this, our “institute” has a history to make, and I would ask you to go along with me in considering how this is to be accomplished. It is essential to success that we should have a good motive to begin with.

In our petition for incorporation we stated that our object was, “The advancement of the art and science of architecture,” &c., and the Government of our country, in closing with these proposals, committed to us specially the duty of watching over and developing the art within the bounds of this important district. But if we look into the matter seriously, we shall probably find that we have laid ourselves under obligations to an infinitely higher power. The laws of architecture do not consist in a series of arbitrary contrivances. They were not invented by man, but merely discovered by him. The process was one of slow degrees carried on in widely-separated quarters of the globe through a long succession of ages, here a little and there a little, sadly marred in many cases by crudity and error, in some radiant with Divine truth, yet all possessed of points of relationship showing a common origin. It is a most remarkable fact that architecture in its highest forms does not bear the least resemblance to anything in nature, that it is peculiarly and exclusively a human work; and yet, long before man came to need it, long before the foundation of the world, at the very beginning, in the councils of eternity, the laws which regulate this art were framed, and, gentlemen, it cannot be supposed that they have been drifting down the stream of time, unheeded by their Author. Emanating from such a source they cannot be trifled with blamelessly. I am inclined to think that they cannot be perverted with impunity. If we feel ourselves

called on to administer these laws under the influence of those motives, I believe that the present state of things cannot continue much longer.

The question has often been asked, "How is it that there is no modern style of architecture?" This question has been so often put without receiving any answer, either by word or deed, that it has come to be considered a foolish question. But so persuaded am I of its propriety and so sure am I that it must, sooner or later, be taken up in earnest, that I shall continue to reiterate the obnoxious question as often as opportunity offers, and at the same time do what I can to demonstrate the reasonableness of the demand and the practicability of getting quit of the trammels that have so long prevented our enjoying the full privileges and honours to which our profession is justly entitled.

Every past period of civilisation had its architecture growing out of it as by a natural process, and exhibiting in a permanent form the more important features of its development. But with us architecture has all but ceased to be a living art, and the present age, so rich in achievement in other departments, is seen making the most ridiculous efforts to insinuate its overgrown person backwards into the empty shells of dead ages, which lie scattered about upon the old tide-marks of civilisation, rather than secrete or shell for itself according to the ordinary course of nature.

If we have no architectural style, it is not for lack of material, for we know nearly all that has ever been done. It is not for lack of wealth, for our undertakings are most extensive, and exhibit a lavish expenditure of money. It is not for want of intellectual talent, for we have excelled all former ages in the number and grandeur of our discoveries. How is it, then, there is no modern style in architecture?

Some will answer that the field is exhausted; but genius and enterprise have converted many an exhausted field into a stage from which deeper and richer fields have been reached and wrought. I will not say that it is easy to rid ourselves of the odium that attaches to us in allowing or contributing to the continuance of this very unnatural and unsatisfactory state of things, but it is not difficult to point with clearness and certainty to the means by which that most desirable end is to be obtained; and it is thus – To abandon with all convenient expedition the whole mass of accumulated human traditions under which we have been, as it were, smothered, and take earnestly to the study of the Divine laws, and by-and-by we shall find it more difficult to keep running in the old rut than hitherto we have found it difficult to get out of it.

Let us once fairly comprehend the living law, and we will at once and for ever get freed from the bondage of dead forms. And yet these old forms are not to be despised; far otherwise. They are there for dissection. They are there to teach us what has been already discovered – to place us upon an elevated starting-point for yet higher attainments – to connect our sympathies with the men whose thoughts they represent, and with the Creator whose laws they reveal to us. I admit that there are in some of the more highly developed styles features which are as near perfection as we can well conceive, and, in so far as we can thoroughly comprehend the spirit that is in them, they remain to us living forms. But as no two minds are exactly alike, and as all our work should be done "on soul and conscience", it is better that everything should be cast into the crucible, and reduced to fluid thought, to be remoulded into fresh forms of expression, even at the risk of suffering a little deterioration. If we

are duly watchful, the process, by being often repeated, must lead to improvement and ultimate emancipation.

The majority of our popular writers on architecture affect to speak derogatorily of all attempts to purify and regulate our architecture, and boldly advocate those styles which admit of greater latitude and variety. They take great delight in marking the peculiarities of individual treatment, of the characteristics of different nations and periods, of the interesting associations which they suggest. Again, we are told that our chief business is to embody the prevailing taste of the time to adapt our designs to the sympathies of our clients. High Art is said to be irksome, and so a style based upon what is called commonsense and homeliness is specially recommended.

Now there is a certain amount of feasibility in all this, but in reality these are the doctrines which have brought our Art into its present state of degradation, and reduced its professors from the position of teachers and ministers of truth to the servile condition of caterers to popular caprice. The writers who have inaugurated the present state of things are for the most part mere literary men, who are guided more by sentiment than knowledge; or professional men who find it easier to adapt the old than to create the new, and seek to justify their course by a free use of the pen in appeals to popular prejudice. The latitude and variety which they advocate are much nearer akin to licence than to liberty.

True liberty lies in knowing and obeying the law. The law is embarrassing only to the transgressor, or to those who, from ignorance of its course, put themselves in opposition to it. If we could conceive of a man having perfect knowledge of the law with unlimited power of imagination, what

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Thomson's Waverley Hotel

“It is always a queer feeling to see emptiness where a big building used to be. Not many months ago travellers going eastwards along Sauchiehall Street had only to turn their heads to see white-fronted waiters serving the guests in the Waverley Hotel. Now they look across a no man's land right into Renfrew Street and see the 'buses running up and down that thoroughfare. This is one of the most extensive 'gashes' which has been made in the city for some time. The space will soon be filled, of course, by a new store.”

Thus the *Evening Times* of 25th June 1935. The “big building” which had only recently removed was Alexander Thomson's Waverley Temperance Hotel.

As uncovered by Colin McKellar, 126–138 Sauchiehall Street was begun in October 1864 and completed in 1865/66 for William Henderson – who also owned and constructed Grecian Buildings further along Sauchiehall Street. The site was originally developed as a block of tenements with shops: the first occupier, according to the *Post Office Directory*, appears in 1865/66; the following year, a further thirteen residential and commercial occupants are listed. Some time after 1871, Thomson converted the building into an hotel for Murdoch & Rodger, the estimate for the work being £2,750. Originally called the Washington Temperance Hotel (as it first appears in the 1874/75 *Post Office Directory*), it was renamed the Waverley Temperance Hotel in the 1880s.

Not too far away, Washington Street in Anderston had been given its name by the original (female) landowner as a mark of respect for US President George Washington. The Sauchiehall Street hotel may have derived its name from a similar source; at least, Thomas J. Muir in the *Evening News* of 27th

April 1935, commenting on the business' closure, remarked that the hotel “under that name had fair patronage from the American tourist.” The name-change in the 1880s came about because of the demolition of the original Waverley Hotel, sited in Buchanan Street, which closed when the North British Railway tunnelled to create the Dumbarton and Helensburgh line. According to the *Evening News*, the hotel's manager or owner appears to have been a Glasgow councillor, Bailie Cranston, but he had “little or not interest” in the hotel when it transferred to Sauchiehall Street:

He allowed his daughter (Mrs Mason) to carry on the name and she managed and superintended the Sauchiehall Street house.

On 5th July 1935, the *Evening Times* reported that the new occupiers of the site would be “Messrs Marks & Spencer Ltd”. In fact, Marks & Spencer did not take up the whole site: a small gap site to the west was left, still being advertised for sale after the new store building was completed. Either the land failed to sell, or M&S found their new flagship store to be more popular than anticipated: they purchased the gap site and erected an additional section to the building, giving the 1930s design the lop-sided appearance it retains today.

Note

The discrepancy in street numbering between Henderson's original development and those of today are the result of renumbering in 1875: before then, that part of modern Sauchiehall Street running between Hope Street and Buchanan Street was called Cathcart Street.

The photographs on Page 1 and on this page are from the Glasgow City Archives in the Mitchell Library, and reproduced with thanks.





By COLIN MCKELLAR

William Henderson, speculative builder

TOWARDS the end of his professional career, William Henderson was involved in the construction of five of Alexander Thomson's major projects, not least Great Western Terrace. Henderson had, prior to his association with Alexander Thomson, constructed tenements and terraced housing at some twenty locations in Glasgow including Lansdowne Crescent, Westminster Terrace, Wilton Crescent, Royal Crescent and Newton

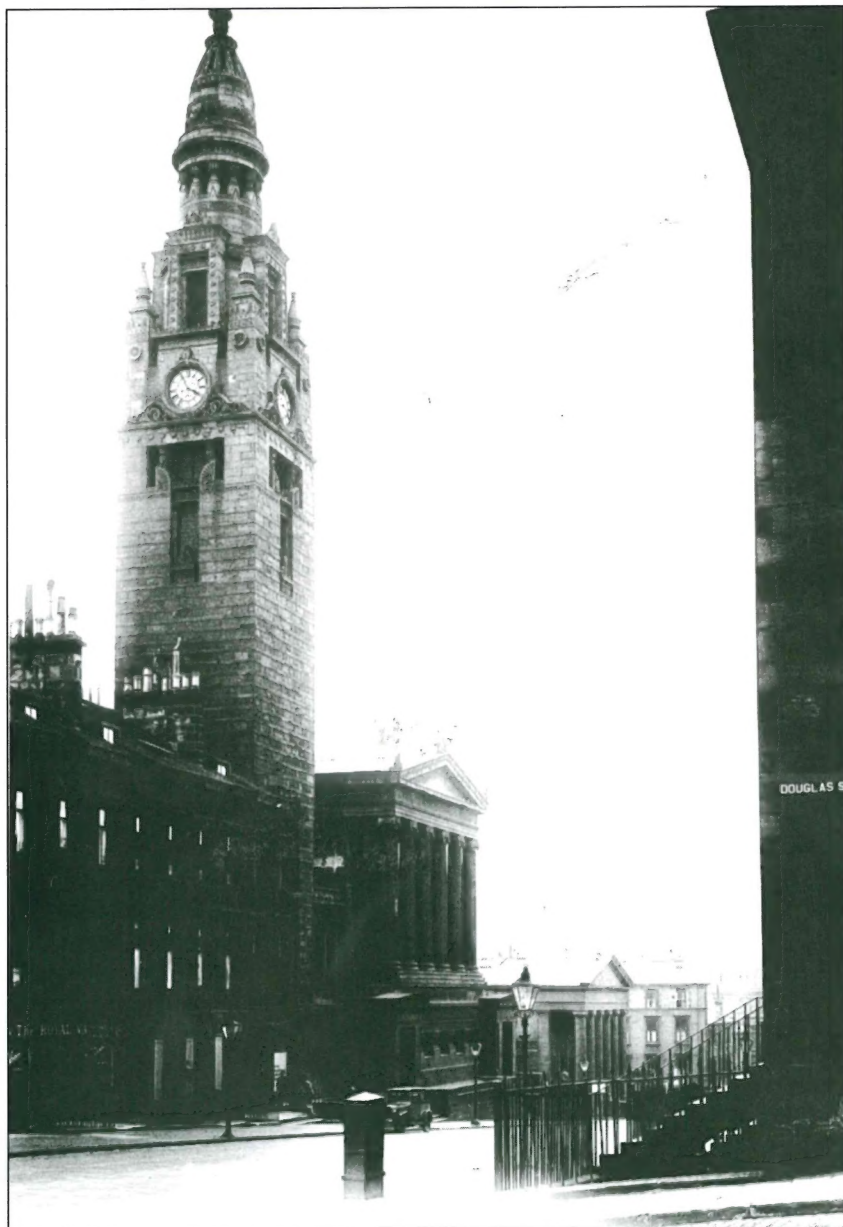
Terrace. Indeed from a complete catalogue of the various developments it might be thought that Henderson's story would be one of continuous success. In fact his working life was punctuated by financial crises and it is mainly from the record of these crises that the career of one Alexander Thomson's chief collaborators can be documented.

William Henderson started in business, as a lath splitter, in 1831. He

began dealing in paving stones in 1842 and the following year diversified further by entering the building trade. A succession of bad debts caused Henderson to discontinue lath splitting in 1847, the same year in which he constructed his first speculative building. By 1854 Henderson had earned profits from the building business of perhaps £3,000. However the supply of paving stones to Melbourne, San Francisco and Sydney, as well as locally, had incurred losses which equalled these gains. Henderson was unable to pay his debts in full but in March 1855 he was able to negotiate a composition with his creditors by which they agreed to accept payment at fourteen shillings in the pound.

The composition allowed Henderson to resume trading and his next venture was also one of his most profitable. In 1856 he "feued a piece of ground at the corner of St Vincent Street and Pitt Street and immediately thereafter... sold it at a profit of about £1,000". The purchaser was the Gordon Street United Presbyterian Congregation and part of the site was to become St Vincent Street Church. The Congregation had actually acquired an area almost twice as large as would be required by Alexander Thomson's design for their new church. In due course the surplus ground was disposed of – to William Henderson!

A typical Henderson development was constructed over several years and often included the sale of ground to other builders. Henderson did complete all, or almost all, the houses at some locations, but at others his participation was relatively minor; at Wilton and Royal Crescents just four and five houses respectively. Some of



E.R. Jarrett: St Vincent Street Church with Henderson's adjoining tenement, designed by Thomson, c.1930

the completed buildings were sold outright while others were retained with the intention of earning a rental income. By 1862, the various buildings which Henderson owned were valued at in excess of £143,000. However the properties were "largely burdened by first, second and third bonds" and Henderson had encountered increasing difficulty in either selling or renting them. Even when a property had been let the rental income was frequently less than the interest on the bonds, and in April 1862 Henderson's estates were sequestrated. The Trustee appointed to realise assets on behalf of the unsecured creditors attributed "the present result to the bankrupt undertaking a huge series of building speculations financed entirely by credit".

The sequestration provides the first tangible link with Alexander Thomson for A. & G. Thomson were ranked among the unsecured creditors, being owed £35. There is no indication of how this debt was incurred but at the date of the sequestration Henderson's assets were said to include 1300 sq. yds. of vacant ground in St Vincent Street "adjoining Middleton's church", Mr Middleton being the then Minister of St Vincent Street Church. The transaction had not in fact been completed and one can conjecture that the debt was a fee for the design of the yet to be constructed tenements.

In December 1862, Henderson offered his unsecured creditors a settlement of fourpence (2p) in the pound and in March 1863 he was discharged from all further liability for his debts and obligations at the date of the sequestration. The discharge enabled Henderson to resume speculative building but, as he would have been literally penniless, the finance to re-start his career must have come from friends and family. Certainly a third party guaranteed the settlement

with his creditors while a gift of £100 from a brother in Dunedin was used to re-purchase his household furniture.

The buildings which Henderson constructed during the remainder of his career were comparatively few in number and, with the exception of some houses in Hillhead, they were to be to Alexander Thomson's designs. The projects with which they were associated were: Northpark Terrace [all nine houses, begun December 1863 completed 1865/66]; 126-138 Sauchiehall Street [begun October 1864 completed 1865/66, later the Washington Temperance Hotel]; 249-259 St Vincent Street [the ground adjoining St Vincent Street Church, begun September 1865 completed 1866/67]; Grecian Buildings, 252-270 Sauchiehall Street [begun March 1868 completed 1868/69]; and Great Western Terrace [begun March 1869, the first eight houses, none complete at May 1870].

William Henderson died on 12th May 1870 and on 3rd June 1870 his

estates were again sequestrated. The liabilities were far in excess of the assets and no dividend was ever paid to creditors.

Sources

'Sequestration of William Henderson, builder and pavement merchant in Glasgow': Scottish Record Office CS318/30/118.

'Sequestration of William Henderson, builder in Glasgow, deceased': Scottish Record Office CS318/19/120.

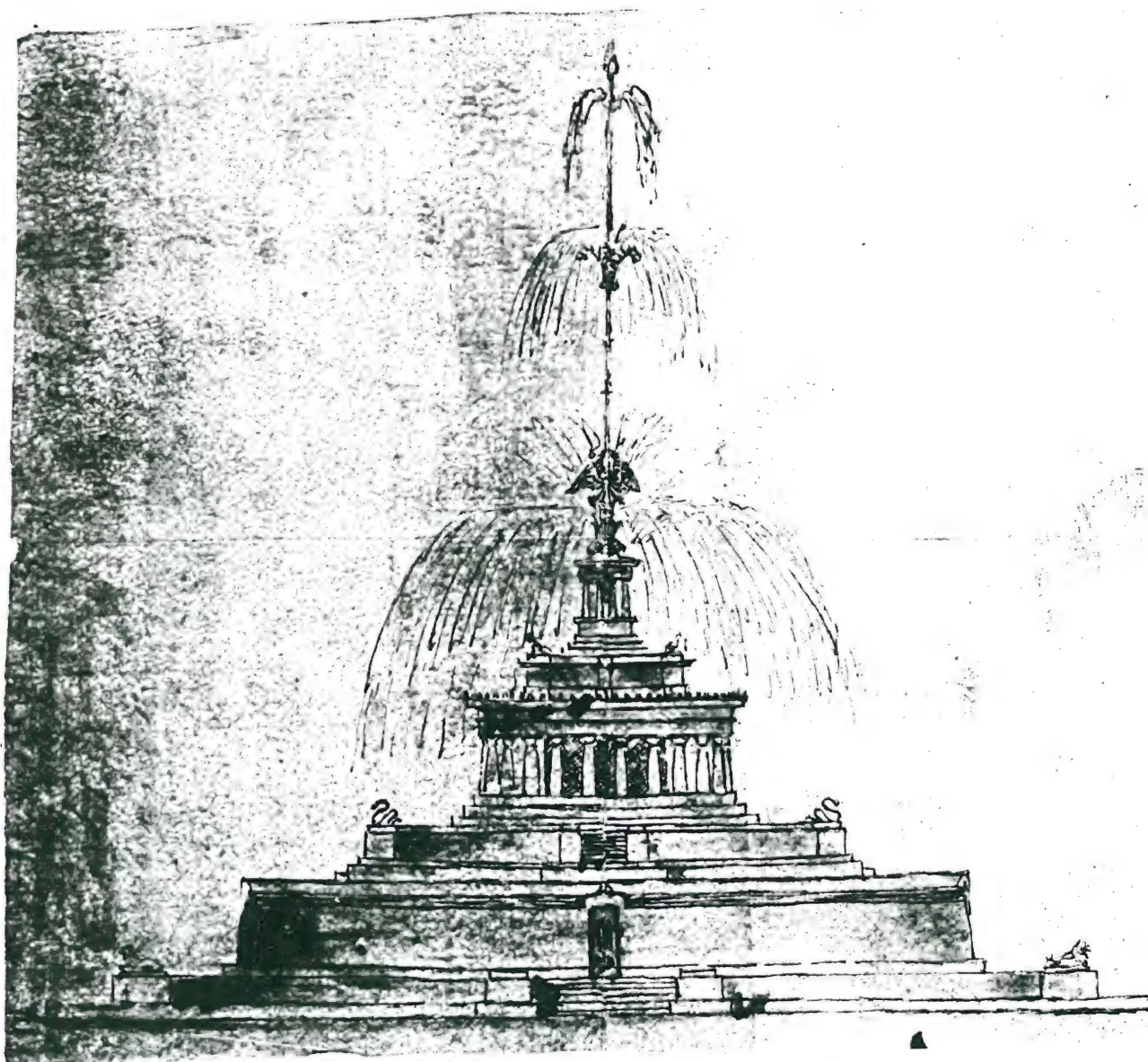
Note

The 'begun' dates are when Henderson's purchase of ground was registered in the Sasine Abridgements. The 'completed' dates are when an occupier was first recorded by the Post Office. The Trustee's report on Great Western Terrace was printed in *Newsletter* 15 pp4-5.

Below: Northpark Terrace, built by Henderson to Thomson's designs



Thomson's modest proposal: a 200ft fountain in Kelvingrove



IN 1870 a competition was held for a design for a monument in Kelvingrove Park to celebrate the introduction of pure water to Glasgow from Loch Katrine.

No prize was awarded, and the eventual consequence of a second competition was the erection of the Stewart Memorial Fountain designed by James Sellars in 1871–72. Unfortunately, the other designs submitted are lost – including one by Alexander Thomson.

We know he competed, as an entry was submitted by 'Athenian' which was the pseudonym he used in the South Kensington Museum competition in 1864. Besides, the Glasgow correspondent of the *Building News* (Thomas Gildard?), writing on 16th September 1870, tells us that he was

"immediately attracted by a large drawing (about 10ft. by 7ft.) which, along with a number of smaller ones, illustrates a design in the Greek style. It is under the motto

'Athenian,' but its author is at once identified as a gentleman who has long been celebrated for his successful treatment of that style.

"It consists of a basin 200ft. in diameter, round which lions are placed at intervals. On the stage above this are placed serpents, and above this again rises a Doric temple, measuring 42ft. across. This is surmounted by a second temple, surrounded by eagles, from the top of which rises, amid a cluster of palm leaves, a huge

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pole like the mast of a vessel, which, at the height of 100ft. from the ground, breaks out again into palm leaves, and, rising 20ft. or 30ft. higher, throws into the air a jet of water. From the base of this pole water is thrown into the outer basin in a circle about 100ft. in diameter. This design is the most imposing and, I may add, the most expensive."

A further indication of the nature of the scheme may be a small drawing on tracing paper pasted in the sketchbook of Thomson's son John, which has been kindly lent to us by his great-granddaughter, Catherine Rentoul.

In this sketchbook, which bears the date 1876, the young John Thomson seems to have copied out examples of his late father's work. Most of the drawings are of details but a few show whole buildings, and as the elevation of a fountain would seem to correspond with the description in the *Building News*, it is possible that it is a copy of a lost Thomson design. But all that is certain is that this extraordinary and ambitious proposal stood very little chance of being executed.

The Alexander Thomson Society Committee

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Committee Meetings

THE next meetings of The Alexander Thomson Society Committee will take place on the following dates during 1998:

Monday, 7th September

Monday 26th October.

All meetings take place at 1 Moray Place, Strathbungo, at 6.00pm.

1998 Annual General Meeting

THE AGM of The Alexander Thomson Society will be held on Thursday 26th November at 6.00pm at Holmwood, courtesy of The National Trust for Scotland.

Foreign Trip 1998

CELEBRATING Thomson's birthday with our regular foreign trip – in 1998, a truly 'foreign' visit to Dublin – has been plagued with travel difficulties: namely that every weekend on which we have so far attempted to make it happen has proved impossible from a travel perspective (The city is a fashionable place to visit at the moment, and there are only so many flights available from Glasgow or Prestwick, many of them fully booked months ahead).

The Dublin trip has now been rescheduled for the weekend of 25th to 27th September (September Weekend holiday in Glasgow). The round trip, including a flight from Glasgow to Dublin, plus shared hotel accommodation, is likely to cost around £130 per person (single accommodation adds around £30). The final price will rise or fall dependent on how far in advance we are able to confirm our reservation.

We are currently holding a reservation for up to twenty people in order

to ensure our flights: to reserve your place in this year's foreign trip, please send a deposit cheque for £25 per person, payable to 'The Alexander Thomson Society', to the Society's address to arrive not later than 30th June. The balance will be payable shortly before departure.

'Alexander Thomson: The Unknown Genius'

THE launch of the programme for Glasgow 1999: UK City of Architecture and Design also heralds a spate of activities to promote the life and work of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson not just to the citizens of Glasgow, but to the many visitors who are expected to come to this year-long celebration of architecture and design.

The first major exhibition to be held in The Lighthouse, the former *Glasgow Herald* building in Mitchell Street, now being converted into the Scottish Centre for Architecture, Design and the City, is 'Alexander Thomson: The Unknown Genius', jointly curated by the Society's Chairman, Gavin Stamp, and long-time Society member, exhibition designer and film-maker Murray Grigor. Other Thomson-related events during 1999 include the official opening of Holmwood by The National Trust of Scotland, and a planned programme of Thomson building tours, currently being finalised.

Another aspect of promoting Thomson and his work is creating a range of memorabilia. A long-overdue selection, including postcards and a high-quality coffee mug, are planned for the summer, in time for this year's tourist season! Information leaflets will soon be sent to members.

By GAVIN STAMP

Thomsons et alii, R.I.P.

THANKS TO Ronald McFadzean's research, two more cemetery monuments in Thomson's characteristic and unmistakable manner have come to light. Both are in Craigton Cemetery and while one would seem to be by Thomson himself, the other must be yet another essay by Turnbull in his late partner's manner.

The first monument in the Craigton Cemetery (*right*) is most intriguing. Although the first name listed is that of Robert Cleghorn MD, of Shawfield, who died in 1821, the proud name of 'THOMSON' appears immediately below the splendid urn at the top, and most of those commemorated bore that name: Cleghorn's wife, Margaret Thomson, who died in 1795; their daughter Helen, who died 1853; George Thomson, merchant, who died in 1852, and his wife Margaret Graham, who died 1854; John Thomson of London, who died in 1858, and others bearing the name of Thomson who had all formerly been buried in the College Churchyard. This was the burial ground attached to the Blackfriars Church, and was swept away, along with the Old College itself, in that shameful deal with a railway company which enabled the University to erect the new Gothic buildings to which 'Greek' Thomson took such exception.

As the College Churchyard was finally removed in 1875 and the first burials in the new Craigton Cemetery took place in June 1873, it is very likely that Thomson himself designed this splendid monument, which was made by J. & G. Mossmann. It is similar in massing and design to that for the Revd O. A. Beattie in the Necropolis but has more delicate detail while the plinth does not project. Instead it is carved with a wreath containing a hand holding a bunch of flowers and the motto 'INDUSTRIE MUNIS'.

The second monument is an obelisk



raised by the congregation of the Queen's Park United Presbyterian Church to their first minister, the Revd William Sprott (*next page*), who was

fatally injured in a railway accident at Bedford in March 1875. As poor Mr Sprott died but a few weeks before Thomson, it is almost certain that the

Ebenezer Thomson,

1813–1847



design was by Robert Turnbull, who made good use of Thomson's earlier designs for both an obelisk monument (in the Mitchell Library) and for the obelisk to the Revd Middleton, first minister of the St Vincent Street Church, in the Necropolis. Unfortunately, on both monuments to these clergymen, the bronze portrait medallions have been removed by vandals.

TO understand the world as 'Greek' Thomson saw it, it is important to recognise the importance of his religious faith. This obituary for Alexander's older brother, Ebenezer (from the *United Presbyterian Magazine*, February 1848) shows something of the religious spirit which surrounded the Thomson family.

'MR EBENEZER THOMSON was born at Balforn, Stirlingshire in 1813. His father having died in 1821, the family, consisting of the widow and nine children, removed in the following year to Glasgow, but were there only about twelve months, when the sole remaining parent was taken from them by death. From this period the subject of our sketch became the head of the orphan household — a position which, young though he was, he occupied with exemplary faithfulness and piety — being the chief support of his brothers and sisters, rearing among them the altar of domestic worship, and setting them an example of virtue and godliness. At the age of seventeen, as appears from a record which he has left behind him, he entered into a solemn personal covenant with God, and consecrated himself to the Lord's service. In 1835, though still but a youth of little more than twenty years, his singular piety and devotedness had so much commended him to the esteem and confidence of his fellow members of the church, that he was elected an elder of the Gordon Street congregation, Glasgow. On the occasion of his being ordained to the eldership, in December of that year, he appended the following note to the covenant already mentioned, showing with what earnest solemnity he regarded the office to which he had been called by his brethren:— "Mighty Jehovah! as I am this day to be ordained to a high and responsible office in thy church on earth, I hereby desire to renew, in a peculiar manner,

my covenant with thee. Thou hast called me now into a situation in which my conduct may have great influence on others, and in which I have more opportunity of promoting thy glory. Lord, well may I claim, who is sufficient for these things? Lord, what am I? O make thy grace sufficient for me!"

'From the year 1830, when it was first subscribed, this covenant was annually renewed and confirmed on the writer's birthday, up till 1840, when he entered into the married relation, after which the anniversary of his marriage forms the occasion of his yearly retrospect, and leads him to record many interesting notices of the goodness of God toward himself and his partner in life. The good resolutions he had so solemnly formed in his boyhood, and so frequently repeated in subsequent years, he was enabled by divine grace, to fulfil with remarkable fidelity. For many years he acted as secretary to the Missionary Society in Gordon Street church, in which capacity his prompt zeal and unwearied exertions for the enhancement of the Saviour's kingdom secured for him the respect and affection of all the congregation, and especially of the brethren with whom he was more immediately associated. In all the other benevolent labours of the church he was an ever-active and valuable co-operator — particularly in those of the Dorcas Society, whose usefulness and prosperity were greatly promoted by his judicious counsels; first, in the framing of its rules, and afterwards, in seeing them carried into effect. In the session, too, the youthful elder, by his winning manners, the affectionate warmth of his friendship, and his zeal for the purity and prosperity of the church, won for himself a "good degree".

'But no amount of excellence attainable on earth can secure for its possessor exemption from the stroke

Continued on Page 12

'How is it that there is no modern style in architecture?'

Continued from Page 7

unbounded freedom, what grandeur, what purity, what variety would pervade all that he did!

But the great difficulty we have to deal with is not the inability of architects to keep pace with other professions, but the obstructions which are placed in their way by their employers; for, instead of giving encouragement to progress as a thing essential, or even desirable, the custom is to forbid it as a thing intolerable. The public has got it into its head that it knows by intuition what is right, and utterly ignores the results of special training and life-long study. Instead of being looked up to as the exponents of architecture, we are regarded as mere agents, and instructed what to do within certain recognised limits of commonplace. The public believes that it understands and loves art, whereas if your work has not the familiar common-place aspect – if it does not suggest some pleasing association – if it does not resemble some other thing that has been sanctioned by some authority – in short, if it has nothing to recommend it but its artistic merits, it is unceremoniously put aside as despicable, and just in proportion to its excellence it is hated and

condemned. An intelligent public cannot brook instruction, and regards anything that seems above its comprehension as offensive and insulting. While this state of things is allowed to continue, it is evident that we shall neither be respected nor remunerated as we ought to be, and so the aim of this association should be to devise means to put matters into a more satisfactory position.

There is a story told of Canova which may be repeated here by way of illustration. Some great man had died, and some of the people in the town in which he had accidentally been born thought it a good opportunity of bringing themselves before the world and resolved that his statue should be erected in their market place. They were recommended to give Canova the commission, and accordingly a deputation was sent to Italy to tell the sculptor what was wanted. He heard them and said, "Is Mr. Flaxman too busy to take your commission?" "Mr. Flaxman!" said they, "we never heard of him." "Ah," said he, "you English see with your ears. Your own Flaxman is the first sculptor in Europe and you don't know it. Give him your commission."

Now then, the question is, how are we to get people to see with their eyes?

The funds of this Institution are not calculated for aggressive measures. It is not intended that we should hold meetings to which the public might be invited to hear lectures. We cannot support a local periodical for the purpose of advocating our views; but perhaps some of our members might be willing to join a committee whose business it would be to act upon the public through the press, either by writing themselves or getting selections from books and periodicals quoted in the local papers, or any other means that might appear likely to further the purposes of the Institute. The public have no interest in being misled, and, if we could manage to awaken an interest in our work, improvement would follow as a matter of course.

The Newsletter

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Membership

Membership of the Society costs £10 per year (Ordinary), £15 per year (Joint / Family), £6 per year (Reduced Rate for students, pensioners and unwaged) and £25 per year (Corporate Rate).

Back Issues

of the *Newsletter* are available, price 50p each plus 2 second class stamps, from the Hon. Secretary at the Society's address.

Ebenezer Thomson *Continued from Page 11*

of the last enemy. In the midst of his usefulness, which growing experience seemed to promise would yet be greatly enlarged, Mr Thomson was seized with typhus fever on the 13th October last, and on the 20th the Master called him to his account. His departure took place on the afternoon of the general communion Sabbath in Glasgow and it was while his brethren were engaged in showing forth the Lord's death in the ordinance of the Supper, he was called away to realize the fruits of that death in the upper sanctuary. It is

remarkable that Mr Thomson is the fourth elder of Gordon Street session with whom this coincidence has taken place; three before him having been removed by death, at a time when their former fellow-worshippers were celebrating the event by which death was deprived of its sting, and the grave of its victory. How blessed the consolation! Denied the privilege of partaking of that wine which is only a memorial of the Saviour's love, but invited to drink new wine with him in his Father's kingdom.'